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SUBJECT: PRI REVIVING UP FOR 2009 ELECTIONS

REF: A. MEXICO 2766
 B. MEXICO 2764
 C. MEXICO 0281

11. (SBU) Summary: PRI has sought over the past two years to recover from Roberto Madrazo's disheartening third place finish in the hard fought 2006 presidential race and is now gunning for big gains in the 2009 legislative and regional elections. PRI is looking to restructure the party from the inside out, better define its ideological stance, and take advantage of tough economic and security conditions to position itself for next year's votes. Nevertheless, a resounding PRI victory in 2009 at this point is far from certain, and it faces a tough opponent in President Felipe Calderon and his PAN supporters.

Regrouping and Recentralizing

12. (SBU) PRI is highlighting recent efforts to rejuvenate the party both in structure and image. PRI congressional deputy Samuel Aguilar from Durango State told poloff on August 28 that the party has undergone an internal restructuring aimed at ridding itself of the infighting and power struggles he blames for the 2006 loss. Indeed, several of the changes to party statutes approved during the PRI's August 23 National Assembly appear designed to redistribute party authority away from state governors--which has been blamed by party insiders and analysts in part for the party's struggles since 2000--and to recentralize power in the National Executive Committee (CEN). Some of the new statutes include granting the CEN the right to approve coalitions made by state-level leaders, the ability to oversee the selection of candidates to compete in state elections, and the power to collect every month five percent of the salaries and expenses paid to PRI public servants and elected officials. PRI Deputy Edmundo Ramirez also touted for poloff on September 9 new efforts to promote younger leaders and allow them to take on more substantive roles in legislative commissions, which he claims will help to infuse new energy in the party.

Burnishing Its Image

13. (SBU) In addition to strengthening party command and control, PRI is also looking to energize its party dogma and better define itself as an attractive alternative to its PAN and PRD opponents. At the August assembly, the party unanimously and officially adopted "social democracy" as its ideological cornerstone in an attempt to differentiate itself from the PAN's conservatism and the PRD's more hardline

leftist bent. PRI Senator and Vice President of the Senate's Mesa Directiva Francisco Arroyo told poloff on September 11 that PRI for too long has paid scant attention to defining its political stance and is rectifying this ideological vacuity prior to the 2009 House of Deputies and six gubernatorial elections.

¶4. (SBU) PRI is also seeking to define itself as the party that gets things done or, as its propaganda posters and stickers exclaim, "Priistas are working." Senator Arroyo noted that, rightly or wrongly, the Mexican public perceives PRI as the party that robs Mexico but governs well. Aguilar said that PRI can play this image against both the PAN and the PRD by taking advantage of Mexico's problematic security and economic conditions to cast PAN as failing to take significant or effective steps to address such woes, and highlighting PRD's obstructionist and divisive behavior as only blocking necessary reforms. PRI leaders told poloff that they think PRI can win between 200 and 220 seats in the Chamber of Deputies next year using this approach, up from 106 of the 500 Chamber slots they currently hold.

Plans for this Legislative Session

¶5. (SBU) PRI, in its efforts to cast itself as the efficient and practical political powerbroker, plans to privilege the passage of energy reform and security measures during this legislative session. PRI politicians and various political analysts believe that some sort of energy reform will be passed by the PRI and the PAN this session in the October

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timeframe. Senator Arroyo also reported that a priority is the passage of some security related legislation, such as measures to toughen the maximum sentences for kidnapping and organized crime. PRI also is preparing to play hardball on the administration's budget proposal, according to both PAN and PRI contacts, and will probably demand that the government rescind cuts to agricultural programs (ref a and b).

¶6. (SBU) PRI's sharpened public criticism in recent days of the Calderon administration's overall security approach (ref c) and economic management probably is a bell weather of things to come. Most political commentators suggest that the legislature will be more or less productive through October, in part because the PRI wants an energy reform feather in its cap. After November, however, PRI and PAN politics in particular will become increasingly embattled as both parties posture in the run-up to 2009. PRI already is impugning Calderon's economic record by releasing a report in the Chamber of Deputies early this month claiming that more than 1,300,000 Mexicans have immigrated to the United States during the first two years of Calderon's presidency, representing a "true catastrophe" and a failure by the government to provide Mexicans with real employment opportunities.

It All Sounds Good on Paper...

¶7. (SBU) Despite PRI's claims that it has indeed learned from its electoral debacles, the party still is facing challenges in adapting to Mexico's changing political realities. The party appears to be as yet unable to specifically define its social democratic vision. When asked by poloff, PRI leaders were only able to describe the platform as being "more like Europe's than like Chavez's" and "focusing on people." Claims that the party is promoting the emergence of young leaders may also be overstated--the Embassy's Labor Attache reports that younger rank and file PRI and affiliated labor leaders continue to be frustrated in their aspirations for upward mobility in the party. Moreover, while PRI has presented a relatively united face to the Mexican public, PRI-affiliated labor contacts also report that internal jockeying for the

2012 presidential candidacy has already begun. State governors such as Fidel Herrera Beltran of Veracruz and Eduardo Borz Castelo of Sonora are beginning to battle for the position along with oft-mentioned Mexico State Governor Enrique Pena Nieto and PRI Senate leader Manilo Fabio Beltrones.

Comment: A Long Road to 2009

18. (SBU) PRI is well-positioned about a year out of the 2009 election season to make gains in the Chamber of Deputies. PRI's political machinery--including its current eighteen of 31 state governorships--is still for the most part in place despite its past electoral defeats. The party's publicly unified face presents a sharp contrast to the PRD and, to a lesser extent, the PAN. Party representatives pay at least lip service to learning from 2006 to move forward on internal restructuring and allow for the reemergence of new leaders, which in theory could help improve its image as a party responsive to Mexico's changing political environment.

19. (SBU) All the same, a resounding PRI victory in 2009 is far from certain at this point. The party, despite efforts to the contrary, has yet to more than vaguely define its platform or the meaning of its new social democratic label. The party may also have a tough time selling the message that it is a political powerbroker "getting things done" if the bulk of what it has accomplished has come through voting in coalition with the PAN on PAN-proposed legislation. Moreover, casting the 2009 votes as a plebiscite on the Calderon government could very well backfire--Calderon's approval ratings still register above the sixtieth percentile. PRI is ready for a fight, but probably should refrain from counting their deputies so far before the candidate selection process even starts. Visit Mexico City's Classified Web Site at <http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/wha/mexicocity> and the North American Partnership Blog at <http://www.intelink.gov/communities/state/nap/>

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